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# The Domestication of Death: The Sequestration Thesis and Domestic Figuration

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## Abstract

Sociological work on the sequestration of death has taken on some canonical qualities, while secondary discussion has not recognized interesting divergences within it. While drawing on Giddens (1991) provides useful ideas, the work of Elias (1983, 1985, 1994) is an especially helpful means of historicizing, contextualizing and theorizing domestic figuration and its role in responding to the threatening 'otherness' of death. Case studies concerning the domestication of death and its ritualized practices are discussed, including representations of the ineffable 'moment' of death. Following Elias, a fully-articulated theorization of death needs to be grounded, historicized, comparative; to explore such matters through the lens of domestic figuration; and to deal with the ontological and epistemological issues raised by death with which the bereaved necessarily have to deal.

## Keywords

domestication of death, domestic configuration, sequestration thesis

## Introduction

In earlier times, most dying and death took place in domestic space, up to when a funeral and burial (and later, cremation) took place. As a result, bereavement and the early stages of mourning occurred in the same place, with the body of the dead person still physically present, and involved situational ritualized practices often requiring the involvement of kin, friends and neighbours (e.g. laying out, visiting). From around the 1880s and 1890s,

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aspects of this were increasingly drawn into a civil-institutional context and sequestered (Giddens, 1991; Mellor, 1993; Mellor and Shilling, 1993), with dying and death instead occurring in nursing homes and hospitals, and laying out the deceased in funeral parlours rather than domestic space.

However, theorizing sequestration in a grounded, historicized and comparative way around what Elias (1994: ~~1939~~) calls 'domestic figuration' shows something rather different from the sequestration of death thesis. This is that sequestration did not *replace* the importance of domestic figuration, but instead occurred alongside its continued importance: people continue to respond to dying and death, not as unconnected individuals, but as members of networks of interpersonal relationships centring on and expanding out from the domestic context. Sequestration is now certainly part of the regulation of many aspects of social life, but this has not overridden the role of domestic figuration in relation to death and dying. Rather than the juggernaut of sequestration, we argue that the 'domestication of death' involves a complex set of sometimes contradictory processes, including but by no means coterminous with those of sequestration, which are experienced and mediated through the nexus of domestic figuration.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion following begins by exploring the sequestration thesis in more detail, in particular overlaps and divergences between the work of Giddens and Elias. It goes on to consider Elias's ideas about figuration, domestic figuration specifically, and relates these to the perceived 'otherness' of death for the dying and also the bereaved. The immateriality of death brings with it difficulties in 'knowing' and in this sense coming to terms with the death of loved others. These are discussed around attempts within domestic figuration to 'represent the ineffable' – that is, death and absence – as part of dealing with the complex interminglings of private and public aspects of dying, bereavement and mourning. Following Elias, we argue that a fully-articulated theorization of death needs to be grounded, historicized and comparative; to explore such matters through the lens of domestic figuration; and to deal with the ontological and epistemological issues raised by death with which the bereaved necessarily have to deal.

## The Sequestration of Death Revisited

Sociological writings on the sequestration of death have taken on some canonical qualities, being frequently referenced in secondary literature as providing facts (rather than arguments) about changing ways of dying and death. A core group of texts (Mellor, 1993; Mellor and Shilling, 1993; and Giddens, 1991) are referenced, together with work extending these ideas (e.g. Willmott, 2000 and Lee, 2008), or seen as supporting them (cf. Stone and Sharpley, 2008; Walter, 2009). However, rather than providing contending or divergent arguments, this literature is often seen as presenting integrated ideas and facts, as in Howarth's overarching comment that:

'A number of sociologists have argued that in contemporary Western societies – broadly depicted as 'postmodern' or 'high modern' – death has been *sequestered*. By this they mean that death has been removed from the public sphere and located instead in the private world of the individual. This sequestration of death to which Giddens (1991) and Mellor and Shilling (1993) refer explains the contradiction between the apparent absence of death in the public realm and

the presence of death in the private lives of individuals... Death, Mellor (1993) contends, in keeping with the project of modernity, has been removed from public space and relocated as a personal issue... Sequestration is illustrated in that the majority of people now die in institutions, away from the public gaze.' (Howarth 2007: 23–4)

This highlights some confusions in the secondary literature: the public aspects of death are seen as having been removed and relocated in a 'private world', and institutionally-sequestered deaths are described as though private ones, rather than institutional spaces/ places being recognized as neither private nor public but something distinctive. However, the confusions here are not Howarth's, who points out the overly binary way that public and private are being treated. They result instead from treating the core texts as though making the same argument, while we perceive important divergences around the public/private aspects of sequestration.

In discussing high modernity, Mellor (1993) and Mellor and Shilling (1993) emphasize reflexivity, self-identity and self-projects in exploring how individuals deal with issues concerning ontological security. Consequently they see sequestration in terms of institutionalized dying taking place in the private sphere because it occurs outside how they interpret public space. There are interesting and important arguments in Mellor (1993) and Mellor and Shilling (1993), but for us their emphasis on reflexivity and self-projects and failure to question notions of public and private are problems. Giddens's approach to sequestration avoids these.

Giddens's (1990; 1991; 1992) theorization of modernity finds his discussion of sequestration (Giddens, 1991:1–34, 144–208). Late modernity for Giddens is characterized by institutional reflexivity, the reorganization of space and time and the 'disembedding' of institutions, with social relations freed of specific locales and recombined across different space-time configurations. Such institutional processes remake social life, and the institutional systems arising from this produce the sequestration of experience (Giddens, 1991:149–58). This involves the intensification of administrative control and surveillance, extending institutional reach, and an accompanying re-ordering of public and private domains, including the growth of new civil society spheres, the massification of social life, and the accentuated need for privacy and intimacy. Sequestration for Giddens, then, is the product of increased control of internally-referential systems, operating not through discourse but institutional correlates which remove aspects of experience from day-to-day life, with madness, criminality, sickness, death, sexuality, nature, being the key arenas in which sequestration has become supreme (Giddens, 1991:156, 161–8).

The sequestration of sickness and death is characterised by Giddens as a separate sphere of medical treatment organizationally linked to professionalisation, and also the creation of 'a place where those who are disqualified from participating in orthodox social activities are sequestered... the concealment from general view of certain crucial life experiences...' (Giddens, 1991:161–2), with such things routinely hidden from general view because they are claimed as technical matters for professionals. Sequestration more generally produces large tracts of social life characterized by predictability, something important for ontological security, although Giddens emphasizes the complexities: 'It is internally complicated, throws up contradictions, and also generates possibilities of

reappropriation... it is not a once-and-for-all phenomenon, and it does not represent a set of frictionless boundaries... The frontiers of sequestered experience are faultlines, full of tensions and poorly mastered forces' (Giddens, 1991:167–8). Such tensions are institutionally put aside rather than resolved, with the 'return of the repressed' occurring at the faultlines, because at such 'fateful moments' people are constrained by circumstance to confront ultimately uncontrollable issues (Giddens 1991:182). However, repression for Giddens is never complete – existential questions remain, counter-reactions appear and new forms of engagement and life politics come into being: 'The process of dying... cannot be seen as anything other than the incipient loss of control: death is unintelligible exactly because it is the point zero at which control lapses' (Giddens, 1991:203). Dying, suggests Giddens, has become a subject for public debate because it is one of the relatively few points at which the repressed *can* 'return', because of its ultimately uncontrollable character.

Giddens's work adds significantly to sociological understanding of the sequestration of death in late modernity. For us, his emphasis on the wider picture and sequestration as a defining characteristic of civil-institutional organizations within modernity is of particular interest. A core aspect concerns 'the return of the repressed', for Giddens an always present response to the experiential tensions and faultlines modernity creates, rather than a product of individualized self-projects as for Mellor and Shilling. Relatedly, his discussion of 'dilemmas of the self' (Giddens, 1991:187–201) around opposing tendencies within modernity puts detail to such faultlines, and this in turn is helpful in recognizing that people are not quiescent before all-powerful institutions and there may be a variety of ways in which 'the return' occurs.

There are also more troublesome aspects of Giddens's arguments. Firstly, death is by no means always 'zero sum', as he puts it, a null state in antithesis to agency and control. People do not all deal with dying in the same way, and different kinds of deaths are precisely different for the people dying as well as those close to them. Secondly, 'the dead' in a social sense can live on through wills, ashes, graves, and as living elements in the biographies of the bereaved (Walter, 1996; 1999; Gibson, 2007). Thirdly, while Giddens is working in a structurational way and his ideas about 'the return of the repressed' acknowledges some agency, nonetheless the emphasis on individuals and denial of the importance of intermediary organisations leads to people being implicitly conceived, if not as 'windowless monads'<sup>2</sup>, then as still overly individualized. We take from this the need for a conceptual apparatus which can surmount these problems while still having a wider analytical frame for relating sequestration to pertinent features of modernity. We find the theoretical-grounded framework for sociological inquiry developed by Norbert Elias helpful in this regard.

## The Loneliness of Norbert Elias

Elias's (1985) *The Loneliness of the Dying* condenses and exemplifies important arguments in his earlier work (Elias, 1983, 1994 (originally 1933 and 1939 respectively)). This is increasingly recognized as a major contribution to social theory which distinctively combines grounded historical inquiry with a wide-ranging theorisation of social transformations over time. Interestingly, however, this earlier work is not referenced by

Mellor (1993), Mellor and Shilling (1993), Giddens (1991), Willmott (2000) or Lee (2008), while Elias's related theorization of 'the loneliness of the dying' is not referenced by Mellor and Shilling (1993), Willmott (2000) and Lee (2008). And although Mellor (1993:20-21) and Giddens (1991:152,161) mention Elias on dying and loneliness, this is in passing and not in-depth assessments. Explaining in detail why Elias's work is not central to the sequestration of death literature is beyond our remit. However, current theorization of the sequestration of death and Elias's work belong to very different theory traditions, with the former of the abstract kind Elias eschewed, while Elias's approach is so substantively detailed that its theory-driven character can be missed by those unused to such a grounded approach to theorising<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, Elias's work is wide-reaching and we think adds significantly to sociological thinking about modernity, death and sequestration. In what follows, the focus is on *The Loneliness of the Dying* although recognizing continuities between this and the Eliasian project overall.

For Elias (1985:45-56), modernity brings with it factors which shape the social meanings given to death and life. Social order is more expected and predictable, and typically death is now seen as occurring only as the final stage of a long orderly process. The civilizing process brings a high degree of internal pacification and the monopolization of violence by the state and sanctioned social organizations, also increasing the sense of security. Therefore death, especially one's own, is expected to come in the supposedly typical form, with other kinds of death (unpredictable, violent, painful) seen as exceptional and experienced by other kinds of people than us. Also there is a high degree of individualization, with social meaning construed as inner-derived rather than as a culture-specific and inter-personal social category. However, alongside this, for Elias (1985:33-5) the increasing differentiation of modern societies actually leads to far greater social interdependency. Although this can seem not so, because people individualize and engage in self-projects to find meaning, beneath the rhetoric, the depth of people's dependence on each other is undeniable. This fundamental relatedness of people, around the concept of figuration as 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people' (Elias 1994:482-3), is crucial to understanding Elias's sociology overall.

In relation to death and dying, for Elias the direction of social change is clear. Death was certainly spoken about more in traditional societies, but this does not mean its experience was peaceful or 'good'. Previously people were ill and died mainly within the domestic sphere, while this has changed markedly. Also children are now 'sheltered' from the facts of decline and death, and generally adults experience embarrassment and difficulties when faced with the dying ~~concerning how they should behave~~. People, especially younger generations, have to work out for themselves how to behave because of the declining acceptability of conventional phrases and rituals and what is for Elias the absence of new ritual forms. And in relation to such matters, there are class, gender and generational differences involved, although in general these have been barely explored (Elias 1985:57).

For Elias (1985:40-45), 'repression' concerns death on both individual and social planes: there are socially instilled psychological defence mechanisms, although the presence of the dying shakes such defensive strategies. Elias (1985:43-5) suggests that terror and fear of death underpin its sequestration in both institutional and interpersonal senses, and is related to its perceived existential ontological and epistemological problematics.

Individualization and interdependency for Elias are closely intertwined aspects of modernity. Consequently exploring the specifics of this is sociologically needed, for how these are configured depends upon the interplay of class, gender, generation, the particularities of the death concerned, and changes over time. As a result, there is no 'return' or 'non-return' of the repressed in Elias's framework, but something more diverse and complicated which has to be explored in grounded ways. Elias recognizes both generalities and particularities through the examination of contrasting figurations over time, and conceives 'figuration' in the following terms:

'The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is called here the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only in figurations.' (Elias 1994:481-2)

Giddens perceives faultlines arising between institutional, public, and private domains; and he treats these as different in kind from how people are interrelated and behave. For Elias, however, the way to understand the interplay of the structural, social and interpersonal is by figurational means. Figurations (Elias, 1985:57–61, 1994:482-3), as the above quotation suggests, are not abstractions but interweavings of connected sets of people, with Elias using the metaphor of a dance to explain their basic elements: emergent but with semi/permanent features; having dynamic internal structures and emergent power aspects; and replacing particular members without the dance ending. For Elias, figurations are not just interpersonal networks, nor is the concept simply to be added to structure as a set of actor-network relations (as Mouzelis (1993) misunderstands it). For him, figurations *are* structures, and structures *are* figurations, constituted by persons and social relations with their dynamics dependent on the formation of shared social activities.

We are persuaded of the utility of Elias's ideas in relation to dying and death. Both Giddens (1991) and Elias (1985) see civil-institutional organization as a constitutive element of late modernity; for Elias (1985), loneliness makes conceptual sense only in relation to shifts and changes in interdependencies; also for Elias (1994, 1985), thinking of people in figurational rather than monadic or individualistic terms enables the structures of modernity and its civil-institutional structures and processes of sequestration to remain core, while simultaneously exploring changing patterns of social relations at local levels over time. What Elias calls the 'fear and terror' of death underpins sequestration in both institutional and interpersonal senses. Such things are we think best explored via domestic figuration, a key figurational element which is mentioned but not explored in depth by Elias.

## Domestic Figuration and Making the 'Other' Familiar

Elias sees domestic figuration as a pivotal point at which large-scale structures and interpersonal processes are brought together, with this figuration acting as a nexus or connection-point. Domestic figuration is however not to be reduced to the home, but



instead involves a network of relationships concerned with and constituting the familiar and everyday and which through the persons of its members brings 'out there' and 'in here' together. It is by this means that what is 'other' is made 'own' even when, or perhaps especially when, this 'other' is challenging or upsetting. Routine and everyday though domestic figurational activity ordinarily is, it is also the nexus around which the unknown and ineffable are tamed by ritualizing and domesticating them (Turner 1969). We now explore the idea of domestication, the domestication of death specifically, in two related senses.

The first involves domestication in the sense of domestic figuration acting as an interface between household members, private relations, kin networks, friendship circles and the civil-institutional and public spheres. Through its activities, the external, material and 'other' are domesticated in the sense of being made internal, processual and 'own'. Domestic figuration centres on the household while linking to this extra-domestic activities and spheres of networks, community, economy, state. Domestic figuration is, then, a material, affective and conceptual space:

'...which... can... be expanded outside the confines of the home to include practices that may be linked conceptually to home and family even if they take place within the domain that we usually call "public". In using such a term, one must of course investigate the meanings, ideologies, and practices associated with it in its distinct historical and cultural settings, rather than take the meaning of 'domestic' for granted.' (Brenner, 1998:16)

Attending to the workings of domestic figuration points up the dynamics of gender, age, generation, and also emphasizes that specifics of time, place and circumstance are critical. Moreover, in Elias's terms domestic figuration does not 'link' private and public, but is a social space and set of social relations in its own right, a liminal contact zone (Pratt 1992) which simultaneously extends out into the extra-domestic, and into what is private in the sense of privy or withheld even from domestic familiars. Domestic figuration is routinely permeable around its members' daily comings and goings and their responsiveness to 'the times'. Its domestication of 'out there' events and constraints by bringing them 'in here' consequently requires re-thinking binary notions of public and private.

The second sense of domestication we want to discuss concerns the role of domestic figuration in transmuting and making concrete and 'own' what is 'other' and 'out there'. Giddens's (1991:187–201) discussion of 'dilemmas of the self' sees these as antimonies or oppositions arising around the tensions and faultlines of modernity. This can be helpfully reworked regarding domestic figuration and its relationship to wider society, with the antimonies involved being external/internal, abstract/concrete, unknown-chaotic/known-ordered, threatening/contained, other/own. Domestic figurational life enables breaching these oppositions through the quotidian activities of telling, discussing, behaving; doing so also in the exceptional circumstances of major transition and change points, including illness and death (Turner, 1969; Bell 1992).

Death is *the* major transition point and threat. While van Gennep's (1909/1961) three stages of ritual progression (separation from everyday activities and removed from everyday time and space; mimetic re-enactment of some aspect of the crisis; re-entry to everyday world) are now seen as overly linear, formalized and determined, nonetheless



ritualized practices do come into existence as part of how people cope with dying and death, greatly influenced by the circumstances and time-period and being non-linear in character. This idea of 'ritualized practices' does not mean ritual in the formal sense, although this can sometimes be involved, for instance, in relation to such things as will-making, death-bed goodbyes, funerals and the scattering of ashes. It instead involves ordinary activities which in the particular circumstances are ritualized by integrating what are usually perceived as oppositions (Bell 1992:47), such as establishing domestic routines within the disruptions of illness and dying. Turner (1969) describes such practices as 'weapons of the weak' because they are a response to something perceived as powerful and threatening, being an attempted containment if not control of this. They occur at the interstices between ordinary and extraordinary; and they are 'holy' in Turner's (1969:128) sense, and 'magical thinking' in Didion's (2005) sense, because they are transgressive of the ordinary. However, such practices are only *situationally* differentiated and marked-off and can be composed by very ordinary things indeed, such as a regular break in a timetable of caring, or discussing familiar topics in upsetting circumstances. Such things temporarily re-structure and re-familiarize space-time, produce an environment which re-establishes notions of order, and thereby help deal with the circumstances which occasioned the need for them.

In earlier times, most aspects of dying and death took place in domestic space. Consequently bereavement and the early stages of mourning took place in the same context, with the body of the dead person still physically present, and involved an array of situational ritualized practices, often requiring the involvement of kin, friends and neighbours. Over time from around the 1880s, aspects of this were increasingly drawn into a civil-institutional remit and sequestered – dying and death in nursing homes and hospitals, for instance (Jalland, 1996). However, sequestration did not *replace* the importance of the domestic figuration, did not *remove* the creation and enactment of 'privy' or secret moments between its members, did not *supersede* public ritualized activities.

While changes over time to the organization of death and dying do indeed demonstrate the growth of civil-institutional organization and sequestration, by no means all deaths for all sections of the population were 'removed' into this. Some death and dying – and some aspects of all death and dying – continued to closely involve the domestic figuration, with its practices running parallel with the continuing public dimensions and also the new sequestered civil-institutional ones. It is also clear some 'old' ways of coming to terms with death and bereavement, in particular around seeing the body and realising its after-death changes, have remained important (Hallam and Hockey, 2001), while new practices have come into being (Gibson, 2008) alongside sequestration. Elias (1985:24), writing about social transitions in the transition period following WWII, suggested that new death rituals did not exist to ~~cover the decline of the old~~. However, 30 years on it is clear many new mourning practices, including both the 'privy' and the very public, have come into being subsequently. There are new practices of dying and death for those themselves experiencing dying, including living wills, assisted deaths and message banks. There are also domestic ceremonies occurring within the formal public structure of funerals, ritualized activities around the disposal of someone's ashes, the creation of public mourning practices which are both domestic and public (e.g. roadside shrines), and new forms of public commemorations of very private aspects of death (e.g. memorial websites).

The issues involved in coming to terms with a death involve making its occurrence material and known, and coping with the essential immateriality of the perpetual absence brought by death (Lunghi, 2006). They combine the ontological and epistemological: those who are living need to hold on, in order to start to comprehend and know the death in question; and at the same time they need to let go, to realize the fact of permanent absence and re-make their lives. The existence of civil-institutional organizations and the sequestration in these of the dying and death of many people creates issues, and impacts on some of the mechanisms, for dealing with dying and death in the domestic figuration and with which the traditional pattern of having someone 'dead, but present at home' helps. Seeing someone when dead was part of this. Also, wanting to have some kind of representational memento of this, whether in paintings, photographs or other media, could, and for some people does now, occur hand-in-hand with a domestic death having taken place. There is a long history to this, traceable at least to Roman representational practices and which has continued through to the present-day.

One aspect of this concerns the perceived importance of 'the last time that s/he was' for at least some bereaved people at some points in the bereavement process, something which is demonstrated by the existence of postmortem or 'after death' photography from the 1840s through to now (Norfleet, 1993; Ruby, 1995; Riches and Dawson, 1998; Burns, 2002; Linkman, 2006).<sup>4</sup> What these depict is 'the hour of our death' (Aries, 1977). That is, they show 'the last time s/he was alive and then was dead', the importance of which is a strong refrain concerning contemporary roadside and disaster site memorials, memorial websites and use of representational objects in the mourning process (Clark and Franzmann, 2006; Gibson, 2004). Domestication here is concerned with the ontological and epistemological issues that death occasions for the bereaved. Elias (1985:43–4) expresses something of this in his comments about the threat of death in modern societies, although the issues are we think more fundamental. As Lunghi (2006) comments, death has no material form in and of itself; its presence leaves an absence, shown for a short time by the formerly living body; but making death material is important to the process of making it known in the sense of comprehending and coming to terms with it. What was once there – a living person we had a relationship with – with their death has irrevocably gone; and postmortem representations attempt to depict the transitional moment which Ruby (1995:174) emphasizes is important in helping people come to terms with a death:

'Mourners are always confronted with two seemingly contradictory needs: to keep the memory of the deceased alive and at the same time, accept the reality of death and loss. Photographs of the deceased serve as a means to address this contradiction, pictures of death are inescapable reminders of the loss... memorial images of a life that is no more help us to symbolically keep the dead alive.'

## Representing the Ineffable within Domestic Figuration

Postmortem attempts to represent 'the ineffable' (the immateriality of what death 'is' referred to above) during the liminal period before the perpetual absence of someone who had been living but who is now dead in a burial or cremation have occurred in photography from the 1840s on. However, representations of the dead have a much longer

history than this (Litten, 1991). In the pre-photographic era, these included mediaeval commemorative tomb sculptures and early modern death masks, through to the resolutely material 1832 auto-icon of Jeremy Bentham ([www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/Faqs/auto\\_icon.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/Faqs/auto_icon.htm)). Such postmortem representational imagery was sometimes intended for public and civil-institutional purposes, as with Cromwell's 1658 death mask to confirm his demise in the political circumstances then existing ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/pe\\_mla/w/wax\\_death\\_mask\\_of\\_oliver\\_cromw.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/w/wax_death_mask_of_oliver_cromw.aspx)), but also for domestic and private reasons as well, such as the life and death masks of John Keats ([www.englishhistory.new/keats/images.html](http://www.englishhistory.new/keats/images.html)). Such things did not cease with the invention of photography and, with the likely exception of auto-iconography, persist now.

In the 1840s, postmortem photography is documented in the US, Europe, European colonies, Eastern Europe and North Africa, while in Britain, copyrights held by Fox-Talbot inhibited commercial applications until legally challenged in 1854. After this, postmortem photography grew as wider commercial applications mushroomed in Britain as well. Thereafter its growth is demonstrated by photographers advertising this as a service, the production of special albums and cases for holding and displaying postmortem photographs, and the existence of a significant number of British commercially-produced examples from the 1850s to the 1930s (and even more from the US and other countries). Successively, the Brownie, cheap flash-bulbs, the instant Polaroid camera, digital and mobile phone cameras, and 'personal' (or rather personalized) memorial websites have been rapidly used for such purposes as soon as they became available. From the advent of the Brownie, vernacular and domestic use increasingly displaced commercial postmortem photography, while recent developments in digital technologies are enabling vernacular and domestic examples to appear in highly public media<sup>5</sup>.

Regarding some deaths, and at some points in coming to terms with them, 'hour of our death' imagery of this kind attracts some bereaved people through its representation of the ineffable - that is, the absence/presence of life and death in the representational 'moment' that the photograph enshrines (Sontag 2003). For instance, the 'cult of Albert' by Queen Victoria after her many times photographed husband's death in 1861 included postmortem photographs as well as casts of Prince Albert's hands, a death mask, and postmortem sculpture for his sarcophagus. For some commentators, postmortem photography is a Victorian aberration, the product of a particular and peculiar mind-set concerning death which no longer exists, while for others its current existence is a puzzling left-over (Burch, 2009). However, something of the felt-need, by some people at least, for such things is indicated by the fact that as soon as photographic portraiture was possible in the 1840s, it was used to produce likenesses of the dead in 'the hour of their death'; and as soon as digital photography and do-it-yourself pages on websites became possible in the 2000s, this too was quickly utilized to display postmortem photographs of the dead. For the feminist social theorist Olive Schreiner, a postmortem photograph of her mother Rebecca Schreiner in 1903 was highly treasured within the domestic figuration and had extra-domestic admirers too:

'The day Mother's picture came [Miss Viljoen] was in my bedroom & it was on the mantle [sic] piece & I showed it her. She Yesterday she came & asked if I would mind letting her look at it

again. She said, "I often say to myself when once it is framed ^ & hung up^ I shall often go there to look at it."... So you see it's not even only to us that picture seems so beautiful & wonderful.' (Olive Schreiner to Ettie Stakesby-Lewis, 22 October 1903, UCT)<sup>6</sup>

Postmortem photography challenges binary notions of public and private 'spheres', because bringing together public, civil-institutional and what is usually deemed to be privy or secret around the practices of domestic figuration and its nexus activities in making the ineffable 'other' into something more familiar and knowable. It is in this respect that Annie Leibovitz's (2006) photographs of her partner Susan Sontag's dying and death should be considered. That is, these concern the domestic aspect of Leibovitz's photography as a very public professional, rather than being an 'unseemly' depiction of privy moments which should remain hidden, as suggested by McRobbie (2006). Also, we do not see such practices as '*return of the repressed*' responses in Giddens's sense, for postmortem photographs existed in the domestic sphere just as soon as it became possible for 'ordinary people' to possess such things, while other postmortem representations pre-date photography by centuries (Litten 1991). It is we think more a matter of people utilizing whatever means there are to facilitate the mourning process, with the representation of 'the last time that s/he was' an important aspect of this for some people.

Social anthropologist Jay Ruby's (1995) research, covering the period from the 1840s to the 1990s, provides the most substantial investigation to date of postmortem photography, with art historian Audrey Linkman (2006) commenting on the UK context. Amongst other concerns, Ruby is interested in what purpose 'hour of our death' photographs might serve. The conventional view is that these were taken because no other likeness of the dead person existed, and occurs now only regarding still-born and very young infants. But as he notes, this is belied by the fact that such photographs may be taken of many times photographed people (our examples Prince Albert in the 1860s and Susan Sontag in the 2000s among them). For Ruby (1995:174–85), the *postmortem* aspect is key: such photographs show the person at a particular transition point when they are no longer living but with their recently living body still present, with the liminal moment so represented pivotal to representing in material form the ontological and epistemological problematics noted earlier.

Our term 'the ineffable' expresses this. Following Lunghi (2006), postmortem photography represents – insofar as it *can* be represented – the immaterial being-lessness of death, that which has no material being but for a short time does have an absence/presence in the remains of the once living. Such photography represents the nexus characteristics of domestic figuration discussed earlier. A postmortem photograph always shows the bereaved 'the hour of our death' of someone loved who had died, and so it acts as a mimetic re-enactment, a holding on, and also as a sign of having to let go. Material from our case studies regarding Prince Albert, Olive Schreiner's mother and Susan Sontag has shown aspects of this. We now ~~discuss~~ focus on domestic figuration in relation to these matters regarding two more case studies: Basil Arnold's death in 1867, and a webpage commemorating Amaiya, first published in 2008.

Matthew Arnold's infant son Basil died in January 1867 (Arnold, 1997). Arnold, his wife Flu and Mrs Tuffin, Basil's nurse, took turns in nursing him and being separated from continuing household life; ritualized practices were engaged in by Matthew Arnold

after Basil's death which reworked the ordinary daily activities they had shared. A postmortem photograph was taken and distributed among members of the domestic figuration as well as displayed at home. Basil's funeral, another mimetic re-enactment, marked a point of re-entry to everyday life for Flu Arnold because of her other child-care responsibilities, although Matthew Arnold moved daily between his paid employment and emotional re-immersion in his son's death.

The two senses of the domestication of death referred to earlier interlink around Basil Arnold's death and postmortem photograph. The nexus aspects of domestic figuration are shown by the situational household separations between servants and other children on the one hand, and Basil, his parents and nurse-maid on the other, as well as exchanges with people external to the domestic figuration, including the doctor, photographer, undertaker, and regarding making arrangements for making the coffin, the funeral and burial. The dynamics of class, gender and age were complicated and did not conform to stereotype. For instance, a distinct 'private' within the domestic figuration quickly came into being, involving Basil's father as well as mother and nurse-maid, with all three involved in nursing him. Matthew Arnold sat every night with Basil during his final illness and spent more time with Basil's corpse in the days between his death and burial than the others. Also, the other Arnold children visited the dead as well as dying Basil and took part in decorating his coffin and bringing it into the downstairs hall before the funeral, to which they also went. The domestic figuration was responsive to the situation, the felt-needs occasioned and the re-making of daily life entailed, as well as producing new ritualized practices before and after Basil's death. These events and the practices arising were in a sense typical of the times, but also against type and specific to the Arnolds and their particular domestic figuration, including the absence of references to religion.

Matthew Arnold's letters comment matter-of-factly about Basil's postmortem photograph and its distribution to people who had known and loved him. The photograph became a focus for memory and acted as a sign of continuing social bonds, with renewed meaning invested in it when an older Arnold child, their son Budge, died unexpectedly at the age of 19 in 1872 and was also the subject of such a photograph. Basil's photograph, as with other postmortem photographs, was displayed in the home and distributed among family and close friends: it was both domestic and extra-domestic, and certainly not private or hidden.

As the above will have indicated, the death of Basil Arnold involved a considerable situational re-making of public and private around the domestic figuration and its nexus of links with the extra-domestic. Although the technology has changed, and with it details of behaviour, a similar reordering of the domestic, the privy, the public, is observable in our case study of a 2008 memorial webpage for a small baby called Amaiya. This was instituted and contributed to by close family through a memorial hosting service (<http://respectance.com/Babygurlamaiya/>). Its pages provide a public narrative of Amaiya's life and death and key events in mourning her, including a changing display of photographs of the living and dead Amaiya. Some visitors have left brief comments in the 'Memories' section, but this webpage was clearly created around Amaiya's family and reflects their felt-needs concerning Amaiya's death just after it occurred; although the page still exists, it has received no further contributions from them. As a memorial webpage concerned with mourning, an outsider might suppose it could have performed this role without the

seemingly completely private photographs of the dead Amaiya, and it would also have been possible to produce a non-web version for domestic and privy purposes only. However, comments on the webpage indicate that the presence of photographs of 'Amaiya the last time that she was' had importance as a domestic embrace of every moment of Amaiya's presence and also as a public statement of the lasting meaningfulness of her life. Public statement and recognition were, then, of significance for members of Amaiya's domestic figuration in showing and validating the privy moments shared with her.

The webpage commemorating Amaiya involves domestication in both senses, with its postmortem photographs providing a mimetic re-enactment by making material and knowing the presence/absence of Amaiya in the hour of her death as well as during her short life. Matters of ontology and epistemology concerning dying and death have to be reckoned with, regardless of whether a death takes place in 'traditional' or 'sequestered' contexts, and in this case study a number of means were used in making known these matters of life and the 'othering' of death. In addition, Amaiya's birth and death took place within the sequestered spaces of a hospital, but were also contained within the domestic figuration too. These were not separate from nor even parallel to each other, but situationally one and the same. As this shows more generally, sequestration does not necessarily replace the importance of domestic figuration in the processes of dying and death, and indeed the civil-institutional often requires domestic figurational involvement to do its work, as here.

Comparatively, these two case studies demonstrate both continuities and changes over time. The continuities occur around the ontological and epistemological aspects of people's experiences of dying and death, the ways that ritualized practices can help in this, and the continuing importance of 'the last time that s/he was' in coming to terms. There seem more similarities than differences regarding the emotional impact of and responses to the deaths of Basil and Amaiya, suggesting that the changes which modernity has undoubtedly brought about have not (as yet) remade how 'being' and 'not being', and the continuing bonds between the living and the dead, are conceived and experienced. The changes are nonetheless striking. Sequestration of some aspects of living, as well as of dying and death, more often occur in a different kind of space/place to traditional notions of public and private, the civil-institutional. Very different means are now available for representing lives and commemorating deaths, which have been made full use of in respect of Amaiya's life and death. In addition, these have brought with them a different nexus of exchanges, with domestic figuration, including in its privy moments, able to connect with wider notions of public life than would have been conceivable, and conceived as desirable, in the earlier period. But what is central for both is domestic **configuration** itself

## Conclusion

There are four points to make in conclusion concerning the argument presented here. Firstly, matters of death and life should certainly be integral to core sociological thinking, as Seale (1998), Walter (1993) and Mellor (1993) have proposed; but for us, theorising this should be grounded in substantive research, with over-time investigations central. Theorising sequestration in a grounded, historicized and comparative way, as our case



studies indicate, suggests something rather different from the conclusions about the sequestration of death reached in un-grounded theorisation. People respond to dying and death, not as decorticated individualised monads, but as members of networks of interpersonal relationships<sup>7</sup>. Sequestration and the civil-institutional are now involved in the regulation of many aspects of life, but in general this has not overridden the role of domestic figuration in relation to death and dying. Sequestration and the expansion of a civil-institutional sphere is one of the many profound changes characterizing late modernity, but with regard to dying and death there are important continuities which also have to be reckoned with in theorising this area of social life.

Secondly, investigating dying and death through the lens of Elias's concept of domestic figuration not only shows the continuing meaningfulness of social bonds and points up the significance of contextual specifics, but also emphasizes the importance of domestic figuration itself. As our case studies have indicated, domestic figuration is the nexus of exchanges between the domestic and privy and the extra-domestic, and sequestration is not a matter of replacing the importance of domestic figuration. Indeed, in important respects the work of civil-institutional organisations and the processes of sequestration are reliant on the continuing presence and activities of domestic figuration.

Thirdly, exploring the role of domestic figuration around the everyday aspects of dying and death shows that dealing with the epistemological and ontological dimensions of death is important for the bereaved, and this is closely related to the practical need which bereaved people have to remake the patterns and routines of their lives. As part of this, a fully articulated sociological theorizing of dying and death needs to grapple with the ineffable and 'hour of our death' and 'last time that s/he was' aspects, because bereaved people have to deal with these aspects of death. This has been discussed in relation to postmortem representation and postmortem photography particularly. Rather than a left-over from an earlier time or a peculiar oddity, we have pointed out its continuing importance for many people in coming to terms with the ontological and epistemological issues surrounding, and the ineffable character of, death.

And fourthly, Elias's ideas about dying, figuration and 'civilising' processes throw important light on notions of sequestration and illuminate not only 'the loneliness of the dying' but also the wider processes of social change and the continuing important role of domestic figuration in this. Following Elias, we have argued that a fully-articulated theorisation of death needs to be grounded, historicized, comparative; to explore such matters through the lens of domestic figuration; and to deal with the ontological and epistemological issues raised by death which the bereaved necessarily have to deal with. We have provided the groundwork for this here.

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## Notes

- 1 Information about the 'Domestication of Death' Project will be found at (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/apsocsci/activities/936>) The DOD Project has three main components: 'Theorizing the domestication of death', 'Speaking about death' and 'Representing the ineffable'; and



includes a set of strategically-chosen historical and contemporary case studies spanning the period 1840 to the present-day, some of which are drawn on in this discussion.

- 2 This is Elias's (1985) term for the semi-solipsistic subjects of much social theory.
- 3 Goudsblom 1977 extends this argument.
- 4 'Postmortem photographs' are those taken after death, usually for close family and friends, as literally 'memento mori', mementoes of the dead person in the hour of their death. They should not be confused with photographs of autopsies.
- 5 The DOD Project's 'Representing the ineffable' case studies include: 1857, Roger Fenton 'Postmortem group', 1867, Camille Silvy 'Postmortem child'; 1861, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert; 1868, Matthew Arnold and Basil Arnold; 1882, Lucy Cavendish and Lord Frederick Cavendish; 1903, Olive Schreiner, Rebecca Schreiner and other settler state postmortem photography; 1920, Cherry of St Albans; 2008 Amaiya's webpage; 2006 Susan Sontag and Annie Liebowitz; 2010, 'Last Portrait of Mother' by Daphne Todd; 2010, Paddy Mulligan's webpage.
- 6 Strike-throughs and insertions (marked ^thus^) are in the original letter. There were other family post-mortem photographs in addition, notably of Olive Schreiner's young sister Ellie, who died in August 1865.
- 7 Except in circumstances where someone is a 'sole survivor' (Seale 1998).

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